

Nietzsche as Educator: Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and the Achievement of Innocence

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He stood up for Nietzsche
I stood up for Christ
He stood up for victory
I stood up for less

— Leonard Cohen, from “Irving and Me At the Hospital”¹

READERS OF LEONARD COHEN'S *Beautiful Losers* familiar with the 1887 preface to *The Gay Science* encounter Friedrich Nietzsche when they encounter F., who, before he died “in a padded cell, his brain rotted from too much dirty sex,” “used to say in his hopped-up fashion: We’ve got to learn to stop bravely at the surface. We’ve got to learn to love appearances” (4).² Those who know that F.’s exhortations are taken verbatim³ from Nietzsche are also likely to know that the philosopher was driven mad by advanced tertiary syphilis and that his first name begins with the letter F. They will suspect that something Nietzschean is afoot, and it is.⁴

Though critics of *Beautiful Losers* have duly noted F.’s propensity to wax Nietzschean,⁵ no one has yet registered the extent of his outright plagiarism⁶ or offered a detailed, illuminating Nietzschean reading of the work. In this paper, I will argue that an appreciation of the Nietzschean dimension of *Beautiful Losers* allows us to understand the kind of thing its author perhaps had in mind when he described the work as “redemptive” (Djwa 8). In the absence of an account of what *makes* his text redemptive, Cohen’s claim would be a piece of unsupported bravado. I aim here to provide such an account.

Apart from F., the *dramatis personae* of *Beautiful Losers* is rounded out by the unnamed narrator of book one, his wife Edith, who is also F.’s lover, and Catherine (Kateri) Tekakwitha, a seventeenth-century Mohawk convert to Christianity.⁷ All four characters are orphans.

While the novel offers very little biographical detail about Edith and the narrator, it is considerably more forthcoming about Catherine and F. Catherine's life up to conversion is outlined in book one by the narrator and after conversion in book two by F.⁸ F., meanwhile, managed before going mad to become a captain of industry, a member of parliament, and a nationalist hero in francophone Quebec.

By his own admission, F. is a "born teacher" (186), and as such poses an interpretive crux for readers. To Douglas Barbour, for example, he is an Age-of-Aquarius shaman bent on an "apocalyptic transformation of man" (136), while to Dennis Lee he is "a virtuoso at techniques of salvation [who] . . . had no idea what salvation was all about" (83). Barbour and Lee agree that *Beautiful Losers* is a kind of *Bildungsroman*, which invites readers to identify less than usual with the narrator as the subject of education, and more than usual with his educator, F.; they disagree about whether F. is a successful educator or a failed one. More recent writing on the novel tends to bypass this debate rather than resolve it. Stan Dragland sees F. as a conundrum, who arouses in readers both a desire to "believe what he says" (15) and a resistance to actually believing it in view, if nothing else, of the difficulty of establishing just what it is he wants you to believe. And Linda Hutcheon takes the book in which he figures to be a "post modern, metafiction" (*Postmodern* 27), focused mainly on itself as literary artifact and on "the act of creating through reading" (33). From these points of view, the calibre of F.'s philosophy is not much to the point — and I agree, but for different reasons. In my view, *Beautiful Losers* has more to do with how the narrator learns than with what F. teaches.⁹

Since it is evident that the narrator's chronic haplessness is meant to mirror familiar bewilderments and predicaments of the modern age, and that his and F.'s preoccupation with Catherine Tekakwitha is bound up with questions about the character and purpose of Canada, it has been natural to read Cohen's text as an allegory of "Canada's historical-political situation" (Wilkins 24). Inspired perhaps by the narrator's announcement that he has "come to rescue [Catherine Tekakwitha] from the Jesuits" (5) and F.'s remark that "the English did to us [Québécois] what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us" (236), allegorical-political readings of Cohen's novel find the moral of the story to be something like this: Canada's beautiful losers are the persecuted, proselytized native peoples, its ugly

winners the relentless, fawningly imitated American imperialists. Earthy native exuberance is invidiously opposed to effete colonial gloom, with the Jesuit capture of Catherine Tekakwitha's heart and mind standing in for the dual conquest of the former by the latter: the lamentable material triumph of European weaponry and the lamentable spiritual triumph of Christian ideology. I do not think that *Beautiful Losers* has been well served by this style of interpretation, and it will be something of a side benefit of my reading that it will allow the reasons why to be brought succinctly into relief.

Taking Dennis Lee's account of *Beautiful Losers* as representative of the interpretive genre in question, we find it organized around the quest for enlightenment and salvation undertaken by F. and the narrator "against the backdrop of a myth of Canadian history [that] has a classic shape: a fall from grace, a period of exile, and a re-ascent to grace" (74). Once upon a time, the peoples of the St. Lawrence Valley, imbued with a sense of "holy energy . . . [that could] be tapped . . . in sexual celebration," wisely refused to sunder nature from instinct from consciousness from God (Lee 64). Then the Jesuits arrived and spoiled everything with their "hatred of finite shit" (*Beautiful* 55). F. then initiated "a counter-movement," which sought to "reverse in his friend's person [the narrator] everything that had gone wrong in Canada since the fall" (Lee 66-67): hence the narrator's mission to rescue Catherine Tekakwitha from her spiritual captors.

In Lee's hands, *Beautiful Losers* becomes a flawed fable of failed redemption, with the Platonic categories of redemption reversed. Whereas Platonism posits a primordial descent from unencumbered spirit into unruly materiality and an arduous return from the one to the other, the inverted version at the bottom of Lee's reading of Cohen's text replaces spiritual innocence and material contamination with erotic innocence and ascetic contamination. Catherine Tekakwitha's genially priapic uncle, who has no time for the vision of heaven promulgated by the Black Robes once he learns that it offers no opportunities for post-mortem hunting, fighting, or feasting (*Beautiful* 142), epitomizes the healthy vigour of unadulterated native life. Catherine herself, especially in respect of her excruciating experience of puberty and consequent taking of the Oath of Virginity (254), epitomizes Christianity's sick revulsion toward sensuality. In converting to Christian asceticism, writes Lee, Catherine Tekakwitha "repressed the sexual energy which

had mediated divine presence, the ‘old magic’. [Her] virginity was an act of blasphemy” (65).

In fact, Cohen has laced the Catherine Tekakwitha material in his novel with ironies, anomalies, and ambiguities that conflict flagrantly with Lee’s account of the role of pre-conquest First Nations life within it. Her Algonquin mother and Iroquois father having died when she was four, Catherine Tekakwitha spent her childhood and adolescence in the care of a “kind uncle” (55) and a swarm of “cruel Aunts” (145). Eager to secure for her an “advantageous union,” the aunts settle on a “strong little man” to whom, at the age of eight, she was to be betrothed; but the bride-to-be so frightened her intended that he ran away. “Not to worry, the Aunts agreed among themselves. Soon she will be older, the juices will start to flow. . . . We will have no trouble then” (61). Their confidence was quite misplaced, and when they tried again it was Catherine who fled the scene. The aunts encourage her twice-foiled bridegroom to rape her, but he cannot so much as find her. When she returns home the next morning, they pummel her enthusiastically:

- Take that! And That!
- Pow! Sock! . . .
- You’re not part of the family any more, you’re just a slave! . . .
- You’ll do what we say! Slap! (66-7).

Later, the aunts spy on Catherine and her naked, dying uncle, and then “drag her to the priest” in order to declare, falsely, “Here’s a little Christian for you. Fucked her Uncle” (145). Singularly poor representatives of a “day-to-day ethos” of “carnal participation in unified being” (Lee 64), these vindictive harridans treat Catherine, the seventeenth-century native misfit, just as the louts who assault Edith (75-77) treat her, the twentieth-century native misfit.

In book two, F. relates the testimony of le Père Cholenec concerning the whitening of the skin of Catherine Tekakwitha’s face within hours of her demise. Peter Wilkins takes this to be “a sign that [Catherine’s] saintliness stems from her willingness to be colonized” (31). But not only does F. urge us to “try to suppress our political judgements” (266), he makes a point of juxtaposing Cholenec’s tale with reports of the reddening of St. Catherine of Bologna’s skin upon being exhumed eighteen days after burial (268). His thinking, duly scorned by Lee (89), seems clear enough: saintly “monsters of love” (122) being as strange in death

as they are in life, it would be no more out of character for an Italian one to come post-mortem to resemble a native North American than for a Mohawk to come post-mortem to resemble a *Bolognesa*.

Finally, we have the story of Uncle's Andacwandet. According to Jesuit missionary Jerome Lalemant, the Huron custom of Andacwandet was a form of therapy by means of ritually enacted "fornications and adulteries" (Thwaites 177) performed before and by a patient at his request. On the basis of passages such as the one below, Lee argues that Cohen's handling of the Andacwandet undertaken for Catherine's uncle is proof positive of his text's infatuation with the lusty vitality of the pre-Christian St. Lawrence Valley. As Uncle

crawled . . . from . . . embrace to embrace — he suddenly knew the meaning of the greatest prayer he had ever learned, the first prayer in which Manitou had manifest himself, the greatest and truest sacred formula. As he crawled he began to sing the prayer:

I change

I am the same

I change

I am the same. (165-66)

Shortly afterwards, however, the ceremony having concluded at dawn, Uncle

was on his knees proclaiming his faith, declaring his cure complete, as into the misty green morning all the lovers sauntered, arms about each other's waist, the end of night shift in a factory of lovers. *Catherine had lain among them and left with them unnoticed*. As she walked out in the sun the priest came running.

— How was it?

— It was acceptable, my father. (167)

As Stephen Scobie notes ("Scheme" 56-57), Catherine's acceptance of the Andacwandet makes a mockery of Lee's account of her role in Cohen's novel. The Catherine who figures in the pages of Lee would have no reason to find an Andacwandet acceptable, much less admit it to a priest, who thinks that God would like to abolish such a damnable and miserable ceremony (167).

To deny that the Catherine Tekakwitha strand in *Beautiful Losers* supports a reading of the book which gives pride of place to its allegorical indictment of colonialism is not to deny that the book is deeply

bound up with the tragically fraught relationships of Canada's three founding peoples — the indigenous native Canadians, the French settlers, and the English conquerors. For the Nietzschean reading of the novel to be developed here, however, it is important to remember that these historical-political relationships are invariably presented to us through the lens of the agonistic and erotic pedagogical relationship between F. and the narrator.

The agonistic side of this relationship is signalled early on by F.'s allusion to what Nietzsche, in the unpublished essay "Homer's Contest," calls the "command of Hellenic popular pedagogy," namely the proposition that "every talent must unfold itself in fighting" (37), and is allegorized, usually in comic form, in the verbal and physical violence that they wreak upon each other. Entranced by the promises of the Charles Axis program of bodybuilding, F. is prompted to jump out the window so as to be with Axis "at the sad edge of the spirit world" (92), and is saved by a timely "Uppercut! Sok! Thud!" (12) from the narrator; panicking in the wake of an orgiastic Québec nationalist rally, the narrator is saved from a beating by a timely intervention from F. (156); enraged by F.'s orchestration of a fake car crash (by means of a scrim of silk painted to look like a wall), the narrator "[throws his] hands at [F.'s] neck with a murderous intention" (120); angered by the narrator's refusal to listen to Charles Axis, F. puts him into a half nelson in an effort to extract a confession of his "sin of pride" (147); and so on. These grotesque physical struggles are tropes for serious spiritual contests: between the claims of chastity and orgasm, scholarship and "unreason" (58), Parliament and a hermitage (205). For F. and his protégé, a reevaluation of values is not so much an intellectual option as a spiritual necessity. Since, like Nietzsche, they take the improbable ascendancy of the Christian gospel to be the clearest example in history to date of values being turned upside down, they are naturally captivated by the subject; and since, unlike Nietzsche, they are from Montreal, they are naturally drawn to a local instance of the phenomenon, the extraordinary life of Catherine Tekakwitha.

The erotic lives of F. and the narrator, meanwhile, exemplify Nietzsche's dictum that "the degree and kind of a person's sexuality reach up into the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit" (qtd. in Kaufmann, *Portable* 444) to an almost didactic degree: the narrator is possessive (16), self-pitying (32), timid (29), prurient (135-36), petty (18), and,

above all, frustrated (119-20, 156); F. is promiscuous (*passim*), domineering (31), hip (157), fulsome (15), exotic (40-42) — and no less frustrated (199, 210-28). That *Beautiful Losers* portrays F.'s "cult of ecstatic sex" and Catherine Tekakwitha's cult of ecstatic anti-sex as deeply complicit, equally stultifying spiritual-erotic postures, is clear and has been duly observed in the critical literature on the novel (eg., Scobie, "Cohen" 110). But where this leaves the narrator has attracted no sustained, intelligent interest at all.

At his worst, the narrator is a self-pitying wanker, wallowing in his own filth, bemoaning at one moment all the sex he failed to demand (58) and at another his inability to be comforted by the thought that "grace will be showered on all who ask for it with faith and fervor" (158). For the most part, critics have taken him at his worst. Where F. and Catherine are larger-than-life figures, the narrator feels that life is larger than he. It has been suggested that we learn so little of his life because there is so little of it to learn, because he does not really have one of his own,¹⁰ and so much about his constipation for the same reason, as a figure for his inability to live. It has been asserted that the narrator is "obviously . . . static[.] . . . not merely physically constipated but mentally, sexually, and spiritually full of shit" (Barbour 137).

Mentally, F. is in fact considerably more "full of it" than the narrator, who may lack his friend's panache but who has a sounder grasp of the limitations of his knowledge (42-44), knows that his pretentious friend is anything but the "man of facts" (237) he brazenly claims to be, and suspects that he does not even believe much of what he says (11, 70).¹¹ Nevertheless, F.'s undeniable brilliance exasperates his fragile companion, who cannot, until the end of book one, shed the role of the poor schmuck who never "gets it." He is in the grip of a massive anxiety of influence: "Why must I be lashed to the past by the words of a dead man?" (42); "F. never shut up. His voice has got into my ear like a trapped fly, incessantly buzzing" (51); "his style is colonizing me" (51); "When will I be able to see the world without you, my dear" (107); "Why must I dissect F.'s old tongue?" (162).

In book one of *Beautiful Losers*, the narrator overcomes his anxiety of influence in the only way possible on Nietzschean-Bloomian principles: by transforming his precursor figure from threat to ally and "becoming who he is," something other than the mechanical product of his influences. For all his self-diminishment, he "dares to think big" (5),

writes well — employing, as Dragland notes, a gamut of registers from a “normal colloquial style” to “elegant prose” to “gibberish” (“Dragland” 16) — and, even at his most snivelling, is never simply depressed or depressing. Typically, he manufactures an appearance of abjection that belies something much more interesting. When, for example, provoked by his horrendous constipation, he implores, “Please make me empty, if I’m empty then I can receive, if I can receive it means it comes from somewhere outside of me, if it comes from outside me I’m not alone!” (49). We whose bowels and mind function normally can only look on him ironically, as someone “inferior in power and intelligence to ourselves” (Frye 34). But when, a half dozen lines later, he exclaims: “Please let me be hungry, . . . then I can be curious about the names of rivers, the altitude of mountains, the different spellings of Tekakwitha, Tegahouita, Tagahkouita, Tehgakwitha, Tekakouita, oh, I want to be fascinated by phenomena (49),” he touches a different nerve altogether; for the spectre of incuriosity, of not being able to be fascinated, is a real and perennial threat to human well-being. Were it otherwise, the market for anti-depressants would be much smaller than it is.

At his best, then, the narrator is a strong poet in the (dis)guise of a self-pitying wanker, a powerful if addled mind whose “consciousness of election comes as a curse” (Bloom 20), and who writes his journal entries, “to rally everything that remains” (Bloom 22).¹² A condensed epitome of his education is found early on in the monologue with which the novel begins: “Do I,” he asks himself, “have any right to come after you [Catherine Tekakwitha] with my dusty mind full of the junk of maybe five thousand books?” (3). A few sentences later he insists that he nevertheless does not “even hate books any more” (4). Given the number of them he has read, our narrator has evidently suffered through the familiar experience of being seduced by certain books and authors into an implausible exaltation of their significance, only to turn away in disgust, to flee “*Hinaus ins weite Land*”¹³ (Goethe, *Faust* I. 418) in search of an unmediated vision of “the music of the spheres and . . . endless force and life and god” (Cohen qtd. in Djwa 8). Now that he has transcended this reactive phase, he can begin to work toward a deepened, more productive understanding of “the advantages and disadvantages of books for life.”¹⁴

If the narrator is to construct “the bridge over which just [he] must cross the stream of life” (Nietzsche, *Schopenhaver* §1),¹⁵ he must get

beyond the debilitating cycle of humiliation and petulance which has thus far dominated his life. An intimation of the progress he makes can be seen by contrasting two superficially similar laments. The first finds him unsuccessfully trying not “to think too much about what F. says” (42) and flirting with the idea of righting his mental balance by returning to his scholarly vocation, remarrying, and living according to his late friend’s example: running for Parliament, philandering, passing off F.’s sayings as his own, even cultivating a phony Eskimo accent (44). For the narrator to emulate F. in this imitative way would be for him to shirk the task of “becoming who *he* is”; it would be to follow the herd in allowing himself to be borne across the stream of life by someone else. Some hundred pages further on, he has become clearer on the point. Still unhappy enough, he now asks, “What good are all your gifts F., . . . if I can’t inherit your memories too . . . ? . . . What use all your esoteric teaching without your particular experiences? . . . What about us failures? . . . What about us such as me?” (157-58). These are good questions and though he may not yet have satisfactory answers, our narrator is at least no longer tempted by hopelessly bad ones.

“Now that I look back,” writes the narrator, “[F.] seemed to be training me for something, and he was ready to use any damn method to keep me hysterical” (70). By the end of book two, it is apparent that the main thing F. wanted to teach his friend was how important it was to “go beyond my style” (190, 206). To go beyond F.’s style, the narrator must find his own,¹⁶ and he cannot, it appears, do this without learning to do without the two people who have ever loved him or whom he has ever loved, Edith and F.:

— Oh, Edith, something is beginning in my heart, a whisper of rare love, but I will never be able to fulfill it. It is my prayer that your husband will.

— He will F.

— But he will do it alone. He can only do it alone.

— I know, she said. We must not be with him. (228)¹⁷

F.’s “whisper of rare love” echoes the narrator’s “something like love” from section fifty of book one.¹⁸ When F. informs the narrator of his impending suicide on behalf of Quebec’s independence, the latter pleads “Don’t do it F. please.” “Why not?” challenges F.:

I know nothing about love, [reports the narrator], but something like love tore the following words from my throat with a thousand fishhooks:

- BECAUSE I NEED YOU, F. . . .
- Thank-you, now I know that I have taught you enough
- BECAUSE I NEED YOU, F.
- Stop whimpering.
- BECAUSE I NEED YOU, F.
- Hush.
- BECAUSE I NEED THEE, F.
- Good-bye. (171-72)

The narrator shrieks desperately, F. intones gnominically: this interchange instantiates a recurrent pattern. Only this time, F. leaves the scene for good, and we are about to find out that he has in fact taught his friend enough. Two sections of the first book of *Beautiful Losers* remain: section fifty-one in which the narrator details his “acceptance” of a bizarre list of objects, and section fifty-two, which begins with a one-sentence invocation, “Phrase-book on my knees, I beseech the Virgin everywhere” and ends with a page of the phrase book entitled “*Sto Pharmakeiol*/At the Drug-Shop.”

The narrator’s experience of life and F. fits the model of spiritual growth allegorized in the first chapter of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* uncannily: “Of the three metamorphoses of the spirit I tell you: how the spirit shall become a camel, and the camel, a lion, and the lion, finally, a child” (*Zarathustra* 137). As a camel, the spirit longs for difficult tasks and heavy burdens; it “kneels down . . . wanting to be well loaded” (138). Once loaded, it “speeds into its desert” and becomes a lion bent on “conquer[ing] his freedom” and becoming “master in his own desert.” The lion seeks out his last master, a great dragon called “Thou shalt,” an animal “covered with scales,” on every one of which “shines a golden ‘Thou shalt’. Values, thousands of years old, shine on these scales,” conveying *en bloc* the enervating message that “all value has long been created” (138-39). In the face of the dragon’s demand that “there shall be no more ‘I will,’” the lion says “I will” (139). But though the lion can create the “freedom for oneself required for new creation,” it is not itself capable of creating new values. For that, the spirit must transform itself anew, this time into a child. “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘yes’. For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred

‘yes’ is needed, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world” (139).

Standing beside F. “in the sepia gloom of the library stacks” the evening before his friend detonates a bomb that will destroy a statue of Queen Victoria and relieve him of his left thumb, the narrator asks his friend, “Why are you looking at me that way?” F. says, “I’m wondering if I’ve taught you enough.” The narrator responds querulously, and is told that “History and the past” have made of his body “a pitiful hunchback” (169). He has evidently been labouring long enough at the burden bearing stage of his spiritual education, and the chief burden he has had to bear is F. himself, to whom he proceeds to declare his love and indebtedness in the upper-case howls cited above. We conclude that the erstwhile camel is ready to shed his burden, roar like a lion in his own way, and begin the work of creating the “freedom for new creation” (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra* 139).

The need for the lion to be followed by the child had been intimated earlier, when, after a double feature and a large meal at a Greek restaurant, F., quoting Sir Philip Sidney’s proverbial dying words, “pressed a small book into [the narrator’s] hand, [saying,] ‘I received this for an oral favour I happen to have performed for a restaurateur friend. It’s a prayer book. Your need is greater than mine.’” “You filthy liar!,” says the narrator upon noting its title, *Helleno-Anglikoi Dialogoi*, “it’s an English — Greek phrase book, badly printed in Salonica.” “Prayer,” explains F., “is translation. A man translates himself into a child asking for all there is in a language he has barely mastered. Study the book” (71).

By the end of *Beautiful Losers* book one, its narrator speaks like a child, struggling to make himself understood in a language — modern Greek — he has barely mastered, asking for clean clothes, a haircut, stamps, books, medicine. The portentous last two words of his macaronic prayer are “*eucharisto*/thanks” (180). He has found a way to overcome resentment — against life in general, modern life in particular, and his own life specifically; appears to have left Montreal for “the true philosophic climate [of Greece in which] you cannot be dishonest” (Nadel 52); has quit his squalid sub-basement apartment and F.’s tree house, and opened himself to the world. He is prepared to embark on one of the “thousand paths that have never yet been trodden” (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra* 189), his own.

While the narrator by the end of his story is grateful, his erstwhile teacher F. is at the end of his psychotic wreck. Never “drunk enough, . . . poor enough, . . . rich enough” (193), or “pure enough” (205), he thinks of himself as a Moses figure unable to enter the Promised Land. *Beautiful Losers* books one and two cover the same erotic-agonistic pedagogical ground twice; first, from the perspective of the congenital loser who pulls himself together, lives on, and achieves a kind of spiritual beauty; then, from that of the congenital winner who falls apart and dies a shrivelled wretch, “his face turned black,” his mind deranged, his vaunted penis “look[ing] like the inside of a worm” (4). If the novel had consisted only of what is now its first book, it would have ended on the redemptive note explained above but been comparatively shallow; the depth added by book two is in large measure the depth of “F.’s pain” (172).¹⁹ But if the novel had consisted only of books one and two, it would not have ended redemptively at all. Hence the need for book three, which, albeit obliquely, redeems F.

Beautiful Losers book three is divided into three unequal sections: a fifteen-page description of the adventures of “an outrageously hideous old man” (294) on a spring morning in and around Montreal is followed, first, by a two-paragraph “false ending,” the second paragraph of which consists almost entirely of direct quotation from the conclusion to Edouard Lecompte’s *Une vierge iroquois; Catherine Tekakwitha, le lis de bords de la Mohawk et du St. Laurent* (Siemerling 56), and then, by the book’s final paragraph, which begins in soliloquy and ends in words of welcome to “you who read me today” (307).

We are introduced to the protagonist of the first part of book three on a spring day in a national forest just south of Montreal (289-90). He lives in “a curious abode, a treehouse battered and precarious as a secret boys’ club” (290), and we are told that “years (?) back, when some fruitless search or escape had chased him up the trunk [of the tree], he had hated the cold” (291). Since the narrator, near the end of book one, had complained that he was “freezing to death in this damn tree house” (139), the one he had inherited from F. and which he had wrongly hoped would be an improvement on his “little semen basement kitchen” (139), and had implied that he had become “the Freak of the Forest” (159), it would seem that the two characters are one and the same.

The old man is greeted by a seven-year-old boy who declines his invitation to climb up the tree and get undressed, asking instead for

“one of those Indian stories that you often swear you’re going to turn into a book” (293). What he gets, apart from a lecture on the importance of proper squatting for the development of his buttock muscles (which echoes remarks of F.’s to the narrator, 201), is a list of the names of the five tribes of the Iroquois nation in Iroquois, English, and French (which echoes an interest in names and naming common to both the narrator [7, 49] and F. [51, cf. note 5, below]).

Having been informed by his interlocutor that he has been informed on to the police, the old man takes to the highway and tries to thumb a lift. “Suddenly, as the action was freezing into a still on a movie screen, an Oldsmobile materialized out of the blur streaming past him” (295). But for a pair of moccasins, the beautiful woman driving the Oldsmobile is “naked below the armrest” (295). The driver and the old man trade entertainingly vulgar insults, in the midst of which she orders him to give her oral sex and announces, in Greek, that she is Isis. To this, the old man replies, “foreigners bore me, Miss” (296). The description of the Oldsmobile’s appearing as if on a movie screen calls to mind F.’s terrorizing the narrator with a fake car crash; the “Ἴσις εἶγο” repeats the beginning of Edith’s speech to F. at the end of the debauchery in the Buenos Aires hotel room; and the claim to be bored by foreigners echoes F.’s statement that he loves dances, but not foreign ones (186). The old man appears now to resemble F. more than the narrator.

Whoever he is, the old man, deposited by the Oldsmobile driver in front of the System Theatre, “makes it” in a way that recalls the obscurely happy ending of book one. Just before praying, the narrator had cried out that he “did not know how much [he] needed” (180); as the last feature in the System Theatre begins, we are told that the old man “now . . . understood as much as he needed” (298). His making it, announced by a “New Jew, laboring on the lever of the broken Strength Test” (306), involves a phantasmagoric “translation” of himself “into a movie of Ray Charles” (305). The New Jew is a sometime ideal of F.’s who was said to be only “sometimes . . . Jewish,” and “now and then, Québécois,” but “*always* . . . American” (203; emphasis added). His vain labour on the *broken* Strength Test symbolizes the futility of attempts to throw off the burden of history by main force and escape the influence of the past by willful amnesia.

While F. had dreamed of the New Jew, the old man has moved on to something better. F. says in his letter to the narrator that “we lay in

each other's arms, each of us the other's teacher" (194), and we would like to know what he could mean.²⁰ If one thing is clear about the relationship between F. and the narrator, it is that the former is the latter's teacher, not the other way around. What, though, if the F.-ish traits of the ambiguous old man were meant to intimate that the pedagogical roles as we have them are artifacts only of books one and two as Cohen chose to write them? What if the materials for an alternative, antithetical-complementary *Beautiful Losers* books one and two lurk within the novel that we have? This other possible novel would have the same cast of characters and the same division into three books. In book one we would encounter the narrator-as-teacher-and-F.-as-pupil relationship from the narrator's perspective, and in book two from F.'s. The epilogue would be unchanged.

The second "ending" of *Beautiful Losers* returns us to Catherine Tekakwitha. Her final epithet, "the purest lily from the shores of the Mohawk" (306), repeats her second: "Catherine Tekakwitha. . . . Are you the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River?" (3). The third and final ending is the product of an unnamed individual, whose "Poor men, poor men *such as we*, they've gone and fled" (307; emphasis added) echoes the narrator of book one's already quoted "what about us *such as me?*" (158; emphasis added). If these two narrators are indeed one and the same, "they" are perhaps F. and Edith in the first instance, and Catherine, Uncle, and the Jesuits in the second. But whoever writes the lines, he finishes on a note that resonates with the ending of the novel's first book: complementing thanks, we have welcoming; complementing gratitude, hospitality.

Readers on whom *Beautiful Losers* makes more than a glancing impact will perhaps find their struggles with it to mirror in their own way the stages of the narrator's Nietzschean education: we begin "wanting to be well loaded . . . that we may take [what is most difficult] upon ourselves and exult in our strength" (*Zarathustra* 138). Cohen obliges us with a difficult, flamboyant, F.-like novel, which we strive to understand and appreciate. Having succeeded in part, we say a "sacred 'NO'" (*Zarathustra* 137) to any nagging imputation that we, rather than Cohen, are responsible for remaining sources of bafflement and annoyance; and having thus asserted ourselves, we can relax, look again, and "sit back and enjoy it" (*Beautiful* 305).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Jörg and Gayatri for instigating the literary circle that gave me the impetus finally to read *Beautiful Losers*. Elizabeth Brake and Susan Haack each read many drafts of the essay with care and I am indebted to them for helpful suggestions, as I am to Los Haward, Dennis McKerlie, Norman Ravvin, Richard Sanger, Rita Sirignano, Barry Thorson, Harry Vandervlist, and three anonymous referees.

NOTES

¹ Cohen, *Longing* 205.

² References to *Beautiful Losers* will be to the Bantam paperback edition of 1967.

³ Since Cohen read Nietzsche in translation, “verbatim” is used here in a slightly extended sense. Furthermore, on the plausible assumption that Cohen used Walter Kaufmann’s translation of the passage, it is interesting that he changed Kaufmann’s “courageously” to “bravely” (the German is *tapfer*), “adore” to “love” (*anbeten*), and “what is required” to “we’ve got to learn” (*Dazu tut Not*).

⁴ F.’s acquaintance with Nietzsche does not stop with *The Gay Science*. Elsewhere in book one, he suggests “a similarity of character [between North American Indians and ancient Greeks], a common belief that every talent must unfold itself in fighting, . . . an inherent incapacity to unite for any length of time, and absolute dedication to the idea of the contest and the virtue of ambition” (11); he describes a joke as “nothing but the death of an emotion” (27); and he declares that “science begins in coarse naming, a willingness to disregard the particular shape and destiny of each red life and call them all Rose” (51). The first sentiment, minus the reference to North American Indians, is lifted from an early essay of Nietzsche’s called “Homer’s Contest,” the second is a condensed version of section 202 of *Human All-Too-Human* II, and the last passage is paraphrased from “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense.” Evidently, something by Nietzsche was among the “few other [books]” mentioned by Cohen apropos the circumstances under which *Beautiful Losers* was composed: “I sat down to my desk and said I would use only the books that were there: a rare book on Catherine Tekakwitha . . . , a 1943 Blue Beetle comic book and a few others” (Lumsden 72).

⁵ Cf. Lee (99-103), and also Hutcheon (*Postmodern* 30), Nadel (73), and Ravvin (22, 25) for example.

⁶ Davey (21), Greenstein (137), Heidenreich (85), Pacey (81), Stacey (231), and Wilkins (29) quote or allude to the “we must learn to love appearances” passage with no mention of its provenance; Hutcheon (*Postmodern* 39), Söderlind (49), and Siemerling (38) do the same for the “science begins in coarse naming” passage; likewise Hutcheon (*Postmodern* 40) and Heidenreich (81) for the “talent must unfold itself in fighting” passage, and Scobie (“Cohen” 118) and Hutcheon (*Postmodern* 34) for the “joke as the death of an emotion” epigram.

⁷ Tekakwitha was born in 1656, baptized Easter Sunday 1676, died 17 April 1680, declared Venerable by Pius XII 3 January 1943, beatified by John-Paul II 22 June 1980.

⁸ F.’s text, entitled “The Last Four Years of Tekakwitha’s Life and the Ensuing Miracles,” is divided into twenty-four sections, the last five of which cover events subsequent to Catherine’s death.

⁹ If, as seems to me the case, F. resembles Cohen’s notorious friend and mentor, Irving Layton, it can perhaps be inferred that the narrator’s voice is a representation of Cohen’s own. In light of the lines from Cohen’s poem for Layton that form the epigraph to this

paper, there is irony in my suggestion that the truly Nietzschean hero of *Beautiful Losers* is not F./Layton, but the narrator/Cohen.

¹⁰ According to Linda Hutcheon the narrator is not given a name “because he is the archetypal Canadian, the beautiful loser” (“Polarities” 50).

¹¹ So F.’s letter to the narrator is perhaps a record of his own painful journey to the wisdom of Socratic ignorance.

¹² The narrator’s motivation for writing his journal thus matches Cohen’s for writing his novel: “I had to write that book. I was at the end. . . . I hated myself. . . . I said if I couldn’t even write, it wasn’t worth living” (Lumsden 72); “I felt it was the end. When I began that book I made a secret pact with myself. . . . It was the only thing I could do. . . . I said to myself if I can’t write, if I can’t blacken those pages, then I really can’t do anything” (Harris 52).

¹³ That is “out into the open land.”

¹⁴ This phrase adapts the title of Nietzsche’s second *Untimely Meditation*, the subject of which is, fittingly enough in the present context, history. Early on in that work, Nietzsche speaks of “the plastic power of a man, a people, or a culture,” by which he means “the power to grow out of oneself authentically, transforming and assimilating everything past and alien, to heal wounds, replace lost things, and reshape broken forms” (*Advantage* 10, translation altered). A central contention of this paper is that the plastic power of the narrator has been drastically underestimated in the critical reception of *Beautiful Losers*.

¹⁵ The immediate context of this phrase from *Schopenhauer as Educator*, the third of Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*, is as follows: “no one can construct for you the bridge upon which precisely you must cross the stream of life, no one but you yourself alone. There are, to be sure, countless paths and bridges and demi-gods which would bear you through this stream; but only at the cost of yourself.”

¹⁶ Cf. *The Gay Science*, §290: “*One thing is needful*. ‘Giving style’ to one’s character — a great and rare art” (Kaufmann 98).

¹⁷ This is not the first time that Edith collaborates with F. in the education of her husband. When she and F. construct a painted silk wall so that the narrator can be terrified as F. drives directly at it at high speed (118-20), inject water from Tekakwitha’s Spring into their veins (138-39), and do the Telephone Dance (38-42), the educational potential of the experience for the narrator is each time emphasized. And Edith is an effective “pedagogue of confusion” in her own right too, contributing to the narrator’s spiritual development by painting herself red and suggesting that they “be other people” (17-18), filling her belly button with a variety of substances (44-46), telling him the story of Tekakwitha’s feast, of which the standard biographers make no mention (123-25, 133), and, finally, letting herself be squashed by the elevator in their apartment building in order to “teach [him] a lesson” (8).

¹⁸ As pointed out by Scobie (“Cohen” 124).

¹⁹ Insofar as F. epitomizes the plight of modern man circa 1965, the apex, or nadir, of his pain is the unparalleled horror of the Nazi Holocaust (Cf. Ravvin, “Holocaust”).

²⁰ Scobie (“Cohen” 100) notes this reversal of pedagogical roles, which he sees as typical of the novel’s concern with the (systematic?) breaking of systems of thought and life.

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